

Organized labor

Not a word about labor responsibility

Statement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council

Chicago, Illinois
August 13, 1957

Migratory Agricultural Labor

For many years, organized labor has been concerned with the problems arising from the substandard wages and working conditions of migratory farm workers in the United States. In recent years, the plight of this group of workers has developed into one of the most serious social and economic shortcomings of America. The labor movement's efforts to alleviate their wretched condition of substandard wages, unsanitary housing, miserable working standards and the absence of adequate educational, religious and other community facilities for their families have been greatly hampered as the result of the specific exclusion by Congress of these workers from the protection of our labor laws and the resultant lack of any effective trade union organization among them. In addition, workers in agriculture are denied the benefits of virtually all other federal social, protective and welfare measures designed to aid the unfortunates of our society.

As bad as these conditions have been for many decades, nevertheless, beginning with the early days of the New Deal there were steady signs of improvement. Under the former Farm Security Administration, decent housing was constructed for migratory farm workers and some success was achieved in raising wages and in providing adequate community facilities. Since the end of World War II, however, the small progress that was made in the past is steadily being wiped out. We believe that the major cause of this regression has been the greatly increased reliance of agricultural employers upon foreign workers. They were stimulated in this by the influx of millions of illegal "wetbacks" from Mexico, who were led by poverty to accept wages and working conditions intolerable to most domestic farm workers.

While the uncontrolled influx of illegal workers from Mexico has been greatly reduced in recent years largely as the result of the cooperation of United States and Mexican

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trade unions and our insistence upon an adequate staff for the border patrol, the number of Mexican workers legally imported into this country for work in agriculture has risen to nearly half a million a year. This large supply of foreign workers willing to tolerate wages and working conditions few domestic workers will accept is growing, rather than diminishing, each year, and agricultural employers are now seeking to expand the influx of such workers from abroad further by establishing new schemes for importing workers from Japan and the Philippines under conditions and contract terms that are much inferior to those for Mexican workers.

The result is that conditions for migratory farm workers appear to be growing even worse. This is happening despite the fact that when the Mexican Contract Labor Program was established, labor was assured that it was a "temporary wartime program," and that the acute problems of human degradation and exploitation which resulted from the influx of illegal Mexican workers would be corrected as a result. The law under which the Mexican program operates sets forth specifically that the wages, working conditions and standards of domestic workers are to be maintained and protected, and that Mexican nationals are not to be permitted either to work for wages less than those prevailing for American workers, or to displace them from their jobs.

Agricultural employers, however, by successfully lobbying against adequate appropriations for the Labor Department to enforce these provisions, have generally succeeded in defeating the clear intent of Congress when it set up the program. Under the impact of the program, the ratio of wages paid farm workers to those of factory labor has fallen from a high of 48 percent in 1945 to a low of 32 percent in 1955, and appears to be still declining. Despite overwhelming and indisputable evidence of widespread violation of the terms of the international agreement and individual work contracts on the part of employers, Congress has again this year rejected the urgent plea of the Secretary of Labor for an increase in funds to provide more compliance officers.

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Over the years, the number of such officers has steadily declined, while the program has grown to involve nearly five times the number of Mexicans imported in the first year of its operations. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Mexican workers today are found living in housing which the Labor Department has termed "unfit for human habitation" and that some growers have been actually making profits of many thousands of dollars from charges levied against their underpaid Mexican workers for room and board.

Even more dangerous to the economy of our own country, in many areas farm employers with the help of unqualified or venal State Employment Security officials have succeeded in deliberately using the Mexican Contract Labor Program to create a surplus of farm workers so as to drive wages down and force both domestic and Mexican workers to accept substandard housing and working conditions. This clear evasion of the law in many areas is accomplished through lowering the wages offered to domestic workers to a point where the growers know they will not be acceptable. When our native workers refuse to work at such low rates and are forced to move elsewhere, the employers then use the resulting labor shortage as the excuse for importing Mexican nationals. The result has been that in some areas wages have been driven so low that growers have been substituting hand labor for machinery they previously used. This is a form of economic retrogression, alien to our basic American economic institutions and progress.

The AFL-CIO recognizes that the entire blame for the lack of enforcement of the Mexican Contract Labor Program cannot properly be placed upon the Department of Labor so long as Congress consistently denies it adequate funds to perform its responsibilities. We recognize that some of the personnel of the department have made outstanding efforts to improve the program and eliminate its abuses. We commend the Department of Labor particularly for its recent action -- belated though it was -- to establish minimum standards for the housing of Mexican nationals. We believe that similar standards are needed with respect to the feeding of Mexican nationals and, perhaps, with respect to community facilities.

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These actions, however, deal with issues peripheral to the basic problem of eliminating the continued abuses affecting the supply of labor and the wages paid. The heart of the problem is the creation of artificial labor surpluses through the importation of foreign workers when United States workers are available but will not do the job except at a decent wage. Such artificially created "surpluses" can have no other effect than that of driving wages downward. To prevent this situation, officials of the Labor Department and the State Employment Security offices must be equipped to make adequate surveys and have the courage and determination to withstand employer pressures for lower wage determinations and more foreign workers than they actually need.

Proof that the Mexican Contract Labor Program need not bring the evil effects which have generally accompanied it has been furnished in one region of the country, the Pacific Northwest. There, because of the diligence and courage of the regional office of the Department of Labor, these abuses have been avoided and wages and working conditions of farm workers, both native and Mexican, have gradually improved.

The Department's regional office, departing from the national trend the other way, has reduced, year after year, the number of Mexican nationals imported into the Northwest. The farm employers in this area have made progressively greater use of the domestic labor force. With this kind of program, wages have steadily risen to the point where seasonal farm workers in the Pacific Northwest, including those Mexican nationals that are employed, receive not less than the national minimum wage for industrial workers.

The regional office of the Department of Labor, with the cooperation and support of the AFL-CIO state labor organizations, in Oregon, Washington and Idaho, has been able to withstand the efforts which have been made by some growers and state agency officials to introduce into the Pacific Northwest the kinds of abuses and evils which have existed under the program elsewhere. The regional office of the Department of Labor is to be commended for resisting the pressures put upon it, and we congratulate Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell for upholding, on appeal, the decisions made by his regional representative.

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The farm labor program should be administered elsewhere as it has been in the Pacific Northwest. If the Department of Labor and State Employment Security agencies cannot, or will not, carry out such a program in other parts of the country, the time has surely come for a fundamental change in the present approach to the farm labor problem of the United States.

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